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ABSTRACT

Research assessing the effectiveness of writing tutorial programs should consider how gender contributes to dynamics of the student tutor relationship. In "On Becoming a More Effective Tutor," Lil Brannon catalogues different postures that the writing tutor may adopt: some are more friendly, concerned with the student's self-esteem, while others are more directive or assertive. Brannon's approach, however, does not consider how gender might determine a tutor's position on this spectrum. An informal study of 74 students who attended the writing center at West Chester University, however, suggests that gender is most important. Results, which given the limited survey sampling (39 completed questionnaires) are nonconclusive, indicate that students generally prefer tutors of their own gender. Male students prefer the directiveness, assertiveness and analytical style of male tutors; females students prefer the sociability, solicitude and self-expressive tendencies of female tutors. Findings suggest: (1) that writing centers should make sure that both male and female tutors are available; and (2) that perhaps all tutors should be trained to be more "balanced" between male and female traits. Case studies of student opinions about their tutors illustrate the findings. Further research about how tutors react to the above findings, about nonverbal behaviors between males and females, about how the gender relationship between student and tutor might affect the paper grade seems promising. (TB)

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"Gender Expectations and Relationships in the Writing Center"

ED 373 355

Research analyzing the tutorial relationship that occurs between a tutor and a student in the writing center often focuses initially on the role the tutor is ideally supposed to assume. The research then looks at these roles and measures how successfully the tutors perform them. This evaluation is usually one-sided in that the students' points of view are not recognized. Through the eyes of these students researchers can see whether the tutors are successfully or unsuccessfully assisting the students; therefore, it is crucial to listen to what the students have to say about the tutorial sessions.

But, before examining what the students have to say, some of the important variables of the tutorial must be considered. The first variable of importance is the defined role of "tutor." As Lil Brannon's essay "On Becoming A More Effective Tutor" states, there are four basic roles a tutor can play:

1: "Facilitator": the tutor serves as an audience for a paper but is also able to lead the student to see what in the paper needs to be clarified. The tutor and student share a sense of equality in regard to power and control.

2: "Supporter": the tutor encourages the student and rewards the student for his/her accomplishments, but the main control and responsibility for the session

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lies in the hands of the student.

3: "Leader": the tutor pressures the student to pay attention and stay focused, therefore the student feels coerced into listening and can feel embarrassed or defensive about his/her writing abilities. This often is the case when students are required to attend the center.

4: "Resister": the tutor does not establish any common ground between his/herself and the student, so there is barely any communication between the two (106).

Along with these roles are the styles of tutoring that the tutor can use. Tutors employing the "sociable" approach establish a friendly and relaxed environment, but they can tend to give too much praise and not enough constructive advice to the student. Therefore, the student's self-esteem rather than his/her writing ability is addressed. On the other extreme is the "directive" approach: when the tutor assumes too much of the responsibility and controls the session. This not only frustrates the tutor who begins to re-write the essay, but also frustrates the student who feels that he/she has inadequate writing abilities. The student in this situation is told what to do rather than discovering it on his/her own. In between these two extremes is the "balanced" approach: when students are allowed to find their own errors and to ask their own questions. This atmosphere is sociable, caring and supportive, but also task-centered. In this approach, the tutors are aware not only

of what they are saying, but also why they say it and how it will affect the students (Brannon 108-9).

These terms and strategies apply to the idealized tutor and the utopic tutorial situation. One element that affects this is the gender relationships that arise between the tutor and the student. Just as we expect all tutors to perform in the same way, students come to the center expecting the tutors to fit into the societal stereotypes that revolve around gender. Females are stereotyped as being: deferent, non-assertive, sensitive, caring, emotionally involved, casual, good at listening, concerned with self-expression and discovery, and are more cooperative than directive in their manners of speaking. Males are stereotyped as: frank and straightforward, objective, analytic, less skilled at listening and more skilled at addressing the specific task at hand, and they are more active, aggressive, and self-assertive (Wood 27,77,151-57; Eakins and Eakins 6,28,38-71).

How these gender stereotypes interact with the stereotypes established for the tutorial situation has not been researched a great deal. Therefore, in this paper I wanted to start examining how these stereotypes are proven or disproven, and whether one stereotype is dominant over the other. Do we expect tutors to conform to tutor roles or gender roles? Does the generalized role of tutor take precedence over the generalized roles of male and female in the tutorial situation? How does all of this affect the outcome of the tutorial?

The research for this paper consisted of several stages; none were designed to provide statistical significance, but were carried out to start the examination of this topic. The initial survey was sent to 74 students who had attended West Chester University's writing center: 37 males and 37 females. Out of this 74, 39 were completed and returned (16 males, 18 females, 4 anonymous), and 14 students volunteered to be interviewed (6 males and 8 females). Of those who volunteered, 7 showed up, the others canceled the appointments. When I called these students to set up new appointments, they said they did not have the time to be interviewed. I will only discuss five of those who were interviewed because these five offer the most interesting responses in this research.

The first subject is William. Over the course of his visits, he has worked with both male and female tutors, but he prefers male tutors. William is impressed with the male tutor he works with because: the tutor has remembered William over the course of his numerous visits, the tutor knows the answers to grammar and punctuation questions without looking them up, the tutor goes through the paper step by step--sentence by sentence, and the tutor "scratched out stuff" and fixed the mistakes on William's draft.

Although William appreciates the work of the male tutor, William does not like the way two different female tutors worked with him. William feels female tutors are "nice, and easy to talk to," but he feels that they are "afraid to mark-up" or "give

their opinions about his paper." William appreciates that the female tutors are interested, but it annoys him that they are afraid to be assertive.

William's main concern going into the session was having his paper proofread for grammar and punctuation mistakes, and he feels that male tutors are the best at this task. The male tutor that William worked with knew "small things" that William did not think anyone would know without the use of a reference book (i.e. Douglas fir: capital "D" and lower case "f") and this impressed William.

Regardless of gender, William expects the tutor to concentrate solely on the essay at hand. He said "we stuck with the paper mainly; that's okay by me, it's the main reason I went there, not to talk about sports or anything."

Overall, William expects a tutor to be a "leader" using a "directive" approach. He feels he finds this in the male tutor. On the other hand, he does not want a "weak" tutor, one who fits into the "supporter" role using a "sociable" approach; he believes the female tutors he worked with were like this. It can be inferred from his answers, then, that the strong, directive role of male is more important to William than the generalized role of "tutor."

The second male, Daniel, has also worked with both male and female tutors. He believes that "males and females are both professional in their attitudes...and they are both obviously there for the same purpose," but ultimately each has different

goals. Male tutors, according to Daniel, "are more concerned with grammar" and the technical aspects of the paper. Females, on the other hand, concentrate on the "ideas expressed in the paper" and concentrate on explaining rather than simply pointing out the "errors" in the essay. Daniel does not prefer one tutor over another because he feels he is being exposed to different methods and therefore "learns different viewpoints from different tutors."

Unlike William, Daniel and his tutor often discuss items outside the paper (i.e. "the Marines," "sports teams," or "current events") and he enjoys this. Daniel feels that this type of discussion helps the tutor understand where the paper is coming from and where it could go. Although Daniel does not mind tangential conversations in the session, he still likes to maintain control. He does not want the tutor to write the paper for him; Daniel wants "to be active" and in control.

Overall, Daniel thinks that all tutors should be "supporters" who use a "balanced" approach so the control of the session lies in the student's hands. Where the difference arises is when Daniel discusses the focus for each gender tutor: male tutors focus on mechanics and the analytical aspects of the paper, female tutors focus on self-expression. In general, this correlates to the stereotypes society purports about each gender. Daniel, therefore, sees tutors carrying out not only "tutor" roles but also "gender" roles.

Interesting results were also found through the interviews

with the female subjects. The first of these female students, Michelle, also participated in sessions with both male and female tutors, but she prefers the female tutor because Michelle likes the methods used by her and likes how her grades improve with the assistance of the tutor.

When Michelle discusses her experiences with the female tutor, she describes the sessions as "a lot of fun," "helpful," and "great." Michelle likes the female tutor because she guides Michelle through the paper and the tutor "is pleasant, not just criticizing." As Michelle says, the female tutor "made me feel more confident in myself and my writing" because the tutor "was interested not just in the paper, but with everything that is going on--social life too." Like Daniel, Michelle feels that discussions of outside issues help the paper, her attitude about writing, and they help "ease" the student.

Most importantly, Michelle learned to trust the female tutor. Michelle was "scared to trust the tutor at first," but now she feels very comfortable with the female tutor because "she is more caring about how you are doing as a person and your grades...and [she] has more of an understanding as far as feelings." At one point in the interview, Michelle went as far as to say that after working with the tutor a couple of times, she felt a "sisterhood" with the tutor. Now, when she has time, she drops by the center to say hello or to chat with the female tutor.

The attitude Michelle has about her sessions with the male

tutor is quite different from the positive attitude she has about the female tutor. The male tutor, according to Michelle, was somewhat "distanced, not disinterested, but not as caring" as the female tutor. Michelle said that the male tutor was more "intimidating" and less concerned with Michelle's life outside the paper at hand. He was "more directive in the way he talked" and he "took control of the session more" (i.e. he marked up her paper, told her how to change her errors, and circled the areas that needed work).

Michelle feels that these affect what she brings out of the session because she is hesitant to bring up certain subjects or ask certain questions of the male tutor, but she feels that she can discuss anything with and ask any question of the female tutor. Michelle said that she noticed a slight difference in the grades she received after working with the tutors. She says: "I can't blame that totally on the [male] tutor; it's probably because I didn't have enough [guts] to ask the right questions that I wanted to...I didn't want to ask him questions for fear that he might think I'm stupid." This obviously affects the outcome of the session.

Overall, Michelle feels that the female tutor is "more understanding and comfortable with the situation," and the male tutor "sat back and judged her." This made her feel anxious and over-powered. In Michelle's case, the female tutor was a "facilitator" using a "balanced" approach; the male tutor was a "leader" using a "directive" approach. These differing roles

affected the outcome of her sessions since Michelle produced more successful papers when working with a female tutor.

The second female student, Carrie, has also worked with both male and female tutors but prefers the female tutor. Before attending the center, Carrie expected it to serve as a grammar and spelling corrector. When she attended the center for the first time, she worked with a male tutor and grammar help is exactly what she received. She says he went over the mistakes, circled them, and then sent her home. After this experience, she stopped going to the center and relied on her teacher for help.

Two semesters later, Carrie returned to the center, worked with a female tutor, and was very pleased. Carrie says that "she felt very comfortable" with the female tutor because the tutor was "more understanding, more comfortable, more relaxed...and was able to understand a lot." Also, the female tutor lets Carrie "use her own words" and say what she thinks and then they discuss the applicable rule or technique for the particular item being addressed.

Carrie continues to return to the center, and as time goes by, Carrie feels more relaxed and "trusts the female more." Carrie feels that the session's "concentration is on 'am I helping this person further than just the paper'...and having me put my feelings into the paper." Carrie now feels comfortable bringing in papers on any subject because the female tutor is "softer" and will be able to understand how to help Carrie. The fact that the female tutor is "open," "non-judgmental," "doesn't

treat me like I was stupid," and is "not as much of an authority figure" keeps Carrie going back to the female tutor.

Like Michelle and Daniel, Carrie appreciates discussing outside topics because these tangents help the tutor gain some insight into the paper and the writer. She does not believe that the tutor and her discuss irrelevant issues or use the tutorial as a gab session; Carrie believes that the tutor always guides the session in a certain direction. Carries says "it's nice to have a friendship and academic relationship...but it's not to the point of being uncomfortable and a waste of time."

There were a couple of times when Carrie could not schedule with the female tutor, so Carrie worked with another male tutor. After working with this male once or twice, Carrie says that she experienced similar sessions as the first time she went to the center: the male tutor took control by locating re-occurring mistakes and correcting them. According to Carrie, the male tutor was "more into the papers and he had a harder exterior...more straight-edged," but his technique was not as detailed and helpful as the female tutor's because he was "more like a teacher and an authority figure rather than a one-on-one" like the female.

To paraphrase Carrie, it is easier for her to relate to a tutor of the same gender, especially when dealing with personal responses and experiences. The chance that the female tutor has had similar experiences as the student helps Carrie feel more comfortable in the tutorial and helps her feel free to ask for

advice and assistance. Carrie feels that women in general are more caring and understanding, but that the female tutor is able to balance this with her knowledge of writing, therefore the female tutor helps students on many levels. Although both tutor and gender stereotypes are evident, the female tutor, according to Carrie, seems to be better able to balance them successfully.

In Carrie's case, the male tutors were "directive" "leaders" who controlled the sessions and stuck to the subject at hand. The female tutor, on the other hand, was "facilitative" and used a "balanced" approach. Gender stereotypes play an obvious role in Carrie's experiences: the males were directive and assertive, the female was understanding and caring. However, it seems that Carrie believes that the female tutor effectively combines the roles of "female" and "tutor" into a successful strategy.

One final female student of interest is Anna, an honor's psychology major who attended the center once and worked with a male tutor. She only attended the center once for several reasons: 1) after attending she only received a C+, 2) she feels she can write well on her own, and 3) "the tutors aren't able to help me with my major papers because of the [psychological] theories and terms in them." Anna says that she would be able to discuss any type of paper, even a personal topic, with any tutor, male or female, if she felt a tutor could help her. I informed her that the tutors have diverse backgrounds and could help her with her psychology work. Once the tape recorder was turned off, Anna asked if I could read a three page paper for her. As I read

it, I realized the personal nature of the paper: a teenage trauma and what she learned from it. We talked about it for a few minutes and then she left.

What I find interesting is that she contradicted herself twice. First, she said that a non-psychology major could not read and understand the paper, yet she gave the paper to me to read. Second, she said that she could discuss personal items with any tutor, yet she had me rather than a male tutor read her personal trauma paper. This might show that she felt comfortable with me and trusted me because: I was in the role of "female" and not "tutor," because no one but me would know that she had asked for help, or because I was out of the context of the writing center. Even though there are several possibilities, one obvious question remains: If a male tutor was talking with her, would she have felt comfortable enough to ask him to read that paper?

These limited results do not offer conclusive facts, but the results do illustrate a trend that should be of a major issue of concern within the writing center and to writing center administrators in the immediate future. In the small sampling that I have discussed, I found that male tutors are perceived as being assertive, directive, and task-centered. The female tutors are perceived as being caring, supportive, deferent, and self-expressive.

If the generalized role of "tutor" were the dominant one, then this difference would most likely not have been found. Therefore, it is my assertion that gender stereotypes permeate

and can subsequently affect the outcome of the tutorial situation. Because of this, changes must be made in order to promote productive sessions. One solution is for directors to make sure that a male and female tutor are always working so that both are available. Therefore, if a student feels more comfortable or is more successful with a specific gender tutor, then the student will be able to work with the tutor with which he/she feels comfortable. Another possible solution is to train all tutors to be more "balanced:" encourage male tutors to be more supportive and concerned with self-expression and encourage female tutors to assert their authorities more in the sessions.

I am currently following many points of departure from this original research. Firstly, now that I have the students' reactions, I am interested in seeing how the tutors react to these findings. Do tutors think they are being tutors rather than stereotypical "males" and "females"? Do tutors feel they are actively altering their styles when addressing different students? Secondly, I am interested in the non-verbal differences between male and female tutors. Eakins and Eakins in Sex Differences in Human Communication outline numerous differences in non-verbal behaviors between males and females, so I would like to know how this affects a writing center tutorial. Lastly, I would like to examine, in more detail, the concentrations that different gender tutors have in sessions and the grades students receive after working with different tutors.

These findings can drastically affect how we train tutors in

the future so the one-on-one sessions are more successful. We have to find a way to keep gender differences from affecting the efforts of both the tutors and the students because collaboration cannot succeed if the tutor and the student do not trust or listen to each other. If collaboration does not lead to success, then we are not assisting students in the proper manner and their writing processes and confidence levels will be negatively affected. As teachers and tutors we want to encourage students to see the benefits of writing and revising, therefore, we need to become aware of potential obstacles and eliminate them before they are too detrimental to the students' writing processes.

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